

RUSSIA ENTERS THE LEVANT

The Arab World in Flux

RAY ALAN

NICOSIA, CYPRUS

UNTIL 1914, Britain, the outside power most concerned with the Near East, had worked to preserve the independence and integrity of the Ottoman Empire as a means of denying footholds within reach of the Suez Canal to her European rivals. Turkey's entry into the First World War, as an ally of Germany, turned this policy upside down and impelled Britain first to undermine the Ottoman Empire with the aid of its disaffected minorities, notably the Hejazi Arabs, and subsequently to fill the vacuum with satellite states governed by Hejazi notables and their henchmen that were militarily, economically, and politically dependent on Britain. The *raison d'être* of these states, like that of the Ottoman regime, from Whitehall's point of view, was to prevent any other power from establishing itself on the approaches to the Suez Canal and to two new British interests, the oilfields of Persia and Iraq. This policy collapsed when the seeds of nationalism it planted proliferated so riotously as to facilitate Italian and German infiltration. Then, after the Second World War had restored British hegemony, a Labor government gave Whitehall's traditional policy a face lifting by attempting to harness and exploit Levantine nationalism through the Arab League—again, for the purpose of excluding actual and potential rival influences. This initiative boomeranged even more grievously than its inter-war prototype,

Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin's splenetic excesses undermining Britain's moral standing as well as her main strategic and economic footholds in the region, and making even the little that remained of her former position dependent upon American support.

Then Secretary of State John Foster Dulles took over. Having urged Sir Anthony Eden to evacuate the Suez Canal zone so as to please the Egyptians, he launched the Baghdad Pact, which he knew would infuriate them. Having pushed the British into the Pact, against their better judgment, he withheld American participation—as if, belatedly, to appease Egypt. When Egypt and Russia riposted with their arms agreement, he opened an auction for Egyptian favors with his Aswan offer, withdrawing it provocatively when Egypt naturally tried to stimulate the bidding by playing hard to get. This gave Colonel Nasser an excuse for nationalizing the Suez Canal (a project he had been nursing for some time) and an opportunity to attain heroic status in Arab eyes. The hapless Sir Anthony was left to salvage what he could from the débacle while Mr. Dulles, angling again for Egyptian "good will," back-pedaled hard on the issue of international guarantees for Canal shipping. London and Cairo were bound to conclude from this inconstancy that, so far as Washington was concerned, British and French interests in the Middle East—and, of course, Israel—were sitting ducks, and that the crusading pact-monger of yesteryear was now more concerned with hushing up discords, merely because they were discords, than with resolving them, irrespective of the principles involved or the precedents that might be established. Cairo tightened its link with Moscow and intensified its efforts to destroy British influence in Jordan

A SPECIALIST in Arab affairs, RAY ALAN has been commenting on political developments in the Arab countries for many years. His analyses of the situation in Lebanon (June 1952), Syria (February 1953), Iraq (March 1954), and the Arabian Peninsula ("Stirrings in Araby," April 1956) are among the many first-hand reports he has contributed to COMMENTARY.

and thereafter liquidate both Israel and the Hashemite regime in Iraq, after whose fall the Baghdad Pact could be torn up. At last London, Paris, and Jerusalem decided it was time to take their own counsel.

Whitehall's inadequacies, in short, did at least have the potentially salutary effect of forcing America to become a Middle Eastern power; but the State Department's inadequacies merely provided a springboard for Russia and so dismayed America's main allies that united Western action to resist Soviet penetration could not even be discussed in an atmosphere of mutual confidence. Today, in an effort to stem the Russophile tide, the State Department is reduced to a pretense of being willing to compete with the Kremlin in calling Britain, France, and Israel to order. That this can never be more than a pretense both Russians and Arabs are aware, for the obvious reason that Russia can always outpace America in a contest of this sort. She is in fact already doing so as I write in the middle of November, reportedly shipping jet aircraft to Syria and inciting Arabs in official Moscow broadcasts to obey Colonel Nasser's call for the sabotage of Western oil installations.

LET us not, however, blame too much on Western policy-makers. Their incompetence has facilitated Soviet penetration, but that penetration would not have occurred had not the Soviet leaders deliberately chosen, as it seems, to wage a new and slightly modified version of Stalin's cold war. It is this Soviet decision rather than any atavistic resurgence of Anglo-French imperialism which is presently inflaming the Middle East. Even without sending Soviet technicians to the Canal zone, it was sufficient for the Kremlin to pour arms into Egypt to insure an explosion one day in the vicinity of Britain's Suez lifeline—if only a major clash with Israel. Once several hundred hand-picked Soviet servicemen were actually on the spot the possibilities would be limitless.

Historians may decide that the Anglo-French-Israeli initiative played into the Rus-

sians' hands. It certainly provided them with a rich propaganda harvest. But the shifting shadows of the propagandists' half-world should not be set above the substance of economic and strategic reality. The British, French, and Israelis have, in the short run at least, upset Russian plans by disrupting a process that seemed bound to lead to the progressive Sovietization of Egypt's armed forces and unremitting anti-Western mischief in and around the Canal zone and the Levantine pipeline ports. An important quantity of valuable Soviet equipment has been destroyed or captured (for all official Washington's indignation, American officers at SHAPE are eager for a look at the booty), and the arrival of the Russian technicians has been delayed. Three hundred Russians and Czechs—mostly air force men—already in Egypt when the crisis broke were hurriedly repatriated via the Sudan and Italy to avoid capture.

Of course, once the Anglo-French force has been replaced by UN units, Nasser will be free to employ Soviet or any other technicians he chooses; he will be free, too, to mortgage more Egyptian cotton crops to purchase new Soviet weapons; the Russians could make him a gift of fresh military supplies. But a restraining influence may come from his immediate entourage and military subordinates. The existence of an "underground" within the Egyptian officers' corps alarmed by Colonel Nasser's provocative behavior and inclined to seek a settlement with the West was admitted in Cairo in mid-November when forty-three officers were placed under arrest. Members of the junta who have some understanding of economic realities are bound to advise against further straining Egypt's precarious economy in the pursuance of hazardous military adventures. Many of the hundreds of officers who have acquired comfortable jobs overseeing the civil administration—among them some of Nasser's closest friends and advisers—may be expected, after the double shock of Sinai and Port Said, to exert what influence they have against any policy likely to jeopardize their new mode of life by provoking Britain,

France, and Israel to further action. The Russians may switch to more subtle tactics and, so long as a UN spotlight is trained on Egypt, refrain from resuming massive arms shipments. But one may be certain that, having now got a political foothold in Egypt, they will not voluntarily withdraw; and so long as the present regime survives in Cairo there is little the West can do to induce them to.

AFTER Egypt, the Kremlin's favorite Middle Eastern state appears to be Syria, whose president, Shukri Bey el-Kuwatli, recently visited Moscow. In the last six months Syria has received from Russia (according to official British sources) 100 tanks and more than 50 self-propelled guns. Syria's attractions in Russian eyes are many: its political immaturity and social and institutional instability; a restless, poverty-stricken peasantry and urban proletariat; a venal press; an army and "security service" whose most influential officers are "national socialists" of three or four different shades but united in their admiration of authoritarianism and the Soviet Union; and, above all, the pipelines which carry 25 million metric tons of oil a year from Iraq to the Mediterranean seaboard.

Seventy-five per cent of all the oil Western Europe uses passes, normally, through the Suez Canal, and most of the remainder is piped across Syria. Both supply routes are now cut. Shortly after the Egyptian government ordered the sinking of block-ships in the Suez Canal, Syrian army detachments blew up the three main pumping stations on the Iraq pipelines. This action was taken despite a Syrian government assurance that the oil flow would be maintained and in defiance of threatening noises from Iraq. In the last week of October, Iraqi Premier Nuri Pasha es-Said had let it be known that he would not hesitate to order his army into Syria to protect the pipelines if the need arose.

Iraq's economy is dependent upon her oil royalties, but this was not Nuri Pasha's only consideration. Iraq has for long desired a

territorial outlet to the Mediterranean (this desire is never far from the thoughts of Iraqi leaders when they discuss Israel), and here was as good an excuse to acquire one as could be imagined. It was taken for granted in Baghdad that, once in Syria, Iraqi forces would stay on to organize a referendum demanding union of the two countries. Turkey, whose foreign ministry formally drew Whitehall's attention last summer to the dangers inherent in Syria's pro-Egyptian and pro-Soviet orientation, would not have objected, and could have expected to receive the Kurd Dag and a score or so of Turkish-speaking localities in the Jezireh (northeast of the Euphrates) in the resultant rounding off of frontiers. Britain, which has toyed on several occasions with the idea of tidying up the Levant in this way, would have been delighted. In the absence of the Soviet factor, this solution of the Syrian problem would undoubtedly have been sought, thus sealing off the "northern tier" of the Middle East from Egyptian subversion and establishing Iraq as the dominant Arabic-speaking state. But then the Russians suddenly began talking about rockets and volunteers, and Soviet jet aircraft arrived in Syria. Nuri hurriedly changed targets and issued a statement urging the powers to collaborate in liquidating Israel.

It was a bitter day in Baghdad as political circles tried to get used to the idea that the thirty-year-old Hashemite dream of a unified Syro-Mesopotamian empire can henceforth only be realized with Soviet permission—which would mean under Soviet auspices—and without the Hashemites. If the Russians can maintain their hold on Syria we may shortly see the "Greater Syria" and "Syrian-Iraqi Union" campaigns taken over by the Communists. More extraordinary things have happened in recent weeks. These movements have always had a powerful emotional appeal, particularly in northern Syria, but have hitherto failed because of a suspicion that they were sponsored by Whitehall so as to bring Syria and ultimately Lebanon under the same British-manufactured Hashemite umbrella as Iraq and Jor-

dan; under Communist sponsorship they would be respectably anti-Hashemite and anti-British and in the event of the aging Nuri's departure from the Iraqi scene could inflict irreparable injury on the West.

Meanwhile, as a result of Egypt's misadventures, Iraq has achieved her ambition to become the most powerful Arab League state; but, paradoxically, her hopes of Arab leadership have waned. Colonel Nasser's regime, though battered, survives and is able to claim—though its claim is not generally conceded—enhanced glory. Many Arabic newspapers and radio stations, taking their lead from the Cairo propaganda machine, have compared the “heroic resistance” at Port Said with that at Stalingrad, and have declared that on the very day of the Anglo-French intervention the Egyptian forces in Sinai were soundly trouncing the Israelis; the Jordan press has reported that Tel Aviv had already been evacuated in fear of an Egyptian invasion. Moreover, Arabic papers ask, has not Egypt now a powerful ally whose mere words halted Britain and France and sent both the UN and USA scampering to appease Colonel Nasser? The Colonel's Syrian ally has been strengthened by Soviet support and is now, if the Russians mean what they say, immune for the first time from the possibility of annexation by Iraq. Saudi Arabia which has broken off diplomatic relations with Britain and France and banned the export of oil to British and French refineries, can for once bask in higher Arab esteem than Iraq, whose government broke off relations with France alone.

Only in Jordan can Iraq still exert some influence. It was very largely the victory of pro-Egyptian elements in the Jordanian elections and the immediate incorporation of Jordan in the Egyptian-Syrian military alliance which decided first Israel, then Britain, to act. Their action so startled Jordan's new leaders—who had just finished proclaiming that, thanks to Gamal Abdel Nasser, Britain and Israel could shortly be written off—that they uttered not a word of protest when Iraqi forces arrived in their midst, ostensibly

to defend Jordan but primarily to prevent them from doing anything silly. The Syrians and Saudis, too, sent troops into Jordan, and occupied a few villages in the extreme north and south. The outcome could be a *de facto* partition of the crumbling kingdom between Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq, which would liberate Britain from her now unwanted, and extremely expensive, obligation to subsidize and defend Jordan, and would give Israel an opportunity to secure a viable eastern frontier. But such a development would only be welcome to Whitehall if Iraq got the lion's share, including the military airfields at Amman and Mafraq, to which the RAF might then continue to have access (the new Jordanian government has already eased it out of Amman).

Not that Anglo-Iraqi relations are what they were. As Iraq's economic situation has improved, thanks to her oil, even veteran champions of her British connection have tended increasingly to demand that she follow a more independent policy. Anti-British slogans were the most prominent and the most popular at the last Iraqi election. Even the present government was obliged to press Britain to wind up her air bases in Iraq and abrogate the Anglo-Iraqi treaty. The two remaining pillars of the Anglo-Iraqi association are the British-managed Iraq Petroleum Company, which Iraqi extremists aim to nationalize, and the Hashemite royal family, which owes its status to Britain and whose Sunnite religion is a barrier between itself and the mass of Iraq Arabs, who are Shiites. For all practical military and diplomatic purposes the Anglo-Iraqi alliance is now a mere fiction, despite the Baghdad Pact. At the recent conference of Asian members of the Baghdad Pact in Teheran it was Iraq which took the lead in urging Britain's exclusion from the alliance.

IT HAS been obvious for some years that Britain could only appease the pacemakers of Arab nationalism by resigning herself to the liquidation not only of Israel but of every one of her own “imperial” and economic interests in the Middle East. Treaty

after treaty might be abrogated, and base after base abandoned, but always the Arab oligarchies, unable or unwilling to tackle the appalling social and economic problems facing them, would still be forced to channel domestic discontent into xenophobic and chauvinistic outlets, and divert the mob at their gates with foreign policy disputes. Britain, the power with the most extensive interests in the region, was bound to be the biggest target, and would be an even more essential target if ever Israel were liquidated. Clearly, unless she were willing to face economic dislocation and geopolitical eclipse, she would one day have to make a stand—over Suez, or Aden, or Iraqi, or Persian Gulf oil. Equally clearly, Britain's stand would be facilitated, and her strategic responsibilities to the Western alliance better fulfilled, if she possessed a base (in the widest sense of the word: not simply a military base) in the Levant safeguarded by local sympathy and understanding rather than by a mere treaty which might be abrogated, Arab fashion, overnight. Such a base could have been sought in Israel. But there was the problem of "Arab susceptibilities"; and so an attempt was made to improvise one in Cyprus instead, in disregard of Cypriot and Greek susceptibilities, with the result that Britain found herself with a colonial war on her hands.

COLONEL Nasser's hostile intrigues have now forced Britain to make her stand—but prematurely and in circumstances highly unfavorable to herself. It is arguable that she has got herself so far out on a limb that nothing can save her now. But if the West, collectively, were to resign itself to this view, the whole region would fall within the Kremlin's orbit. The issue is no longer the relatively parochial Anglo-Arab tug of war, which has occupied the Middle East in the intervals of the parallel Arab-Jewish contest for so many years, but the Soviet government's decision to make the Levant a cockpit of cold war. A British withdrawal from the region could only be conceivable in present circumstances if America were willing to

step in physically, and in strength, instead: it would almost certainly necessitate American intervention.

In this new situation the West has only three dependable assets: Turkey, Israel, and the British military force, temporarily including some French units, based on Cyprus. (The present Iraqi government, though not the Iraqi people, is anti-Soviet; but in times of crisis, as Britain knows to her cost, Iraqi governments are notoriously fragile reeds.) Israel, however, despite her Sinai victory, is militarily weak. And the British suffer the disadvantage of having both their headquarters base (Cyprus) and their only outlying mainland bases (in Jordan) in what is in effect hostile territory, where stores and communications are liable to be sabotaged and troops to be attacked. Worse, Britain's forcible retention of Cyprus has alienated Greece, until recently one of NATO's most dependable bastions, but today disillusioned and angrily neutralist: were Russia to attack Britain and Turkey many Greeks would applaud. The West's three assets, evidently, don't add up to very much. What can be done?

Firstly, Israel must be strengthened, both militarily and diplomatically. The moment her neighbors realize that she is no longer a mere fruit for the picking they will be less inclined to play with their Stalin tanks—and less inclined to solicit them in the first place. If the United States continues to follow the policy of leaving this pro-Western nation vulnerable while its anti-Western neighbors pile up Soviet arms, she will bear a terrible responsibility. Further, there should be no question of allowing Nasser to reestablish his Soviet-stocked bases in Sinai, to start his mischief all over again. If the whole of Sinai is demilitarized, and inspected periodically by the UN, border tension between Egypt and Israel—and *fedayeen* outrages, in this sector, at least—will become a thing of the past. The width of the desert will see to that. *Any government, Communist or other, which works at the UN against demilitarization of Sinai will reveal itself beyond doubt as striving to perpetuate*

instability in the area for its own purpose.

Secondly, Britain should endeavor, with American support, to induce the Israel government to lease her (within the framework of a mutual-aid pact) a major base in the Negev and naval facilities at Elath and somewhere on the Mediterranean. She could then close her bases in Jordan, without waiting to be thrown out, and progressively reduce her establishment in Cyprus, thus clearing the way for a generous offer to Greece and ultimately a tripartite (Britain-Greece-Turkey) agreement on the island's future which would bring Greece back into the Western fold. With a British base in Israel, neither Egypt nor Syria would be inclined to permit a build-up of Soviet military or political strength on its territory: not even the most irresponsible government likes to contemplate the possibility of its territory becoming a battlefield. And freedom of navigation through the Suez Canal would no longer be in doubt.

One can already hear the Whitehall suicide squad bleating, as it shuffles among its ruins: "But what about Arab susceptibilities?" The coffin of the last Foreign Office man to be evacuated from the Middle East will probably bear this inscription. Nothing Britain can now do in the Middle East will damage "Arab susceptibilities"—in the sense meant here—as much as the bombing and occupation of Port Said. If Britain or America had had a defense pact with Israel earlier this year, the Egyptians, Britons, and Frenchmen who died at Port Said would still be alive; Israel's Sinai campaign would not have been necessary. It is worth noting, incidentally, that public opinion throughout the Arab states believes that British forces already have a base in Israel and cooperated with the Israelis in clearing Sinai. The press of Britain's erstwhile ally Jordan announced that British forces took Gaza and then handed it to Israel. As well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb.